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WORLD**

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**Democracy and the Rule
of Law Project**



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CONTENTS

Breaking Out of the Holding Pattern	5
Mass Constituencies for Democracy: A Conundrum	6
Making Democracy Relevant.	7
Mass Ideologies in the Arab World	10
Building Constituencies for Democracy	12

THE CENTRAL DILEMMA OF DEMOCRATIC reform in Arab countries can be summed up fairly simply. Presidents and kings remain too powerful, untrammelled by the limits imposed by effective parliaments and independent judiciaries. Countervailing institutions remain weak, if they exist at all, not only because constitutions and laws deliberately keep them that way, but also because they are not backed by organized citizens demanding political rights, participation, and government accountability. This does not mean that there is no desire for democracy on the part of Arab publics. Recent opinion surveys suggest that in the abstract there is strong support for more open political systems, increased protection of human rights, and broader personal liberties. However, the existence of a general, diffuse sense that democracy is a good thing is quite different from the existence of organized constituencies that provide a counterweight to the authoritarianism of incumbent governments. The demand, or better the desire, for democracy is present in the Arab world today; what is lacking is a supply of broad-based political organizations pushing for democracy—political parties, social movements, labor unions, large civic organizations. Unless such constituencies develop, the future of democracy remains extremely uncertain. In many countries, governments anxious to burnish their modern image will continue to introduce modest reforms. Until the governments face stronger pressure from organized citizens, however, they will not take steps to truly curb the power of the executive by strengthening checks and balances and allowing unfettered political participation.

Small constituencies for democratic change do exist in the Arab world. Many intellectuals have embraced the idea of democracy and popular participation and are speaking up with increasing openness on these issues. This is not a new development. Political elites that believe in political reform have long existed in the region. Arab intellectuals have been keenly aware of the need for change ever since the intensification of contacts with Europe in the nineteenth century drove home the extent to which the Arab world was stagnating. But until recently, intellectuals have been divided about what change was necessary to revitalize the region. Not all looked to democracy for salvation. Nationalism, both as the nationalism of one country or as pan-Arab nationalism, has been an important response to the challenge of change. Arab socialism has as well. In the last decade, however, the idea of democracy has come to occupy an increasingly large space, even if it is challenged by the upsurge of Islamist ideas.

The Arab debate about democracy, which was rife in the early part of the twentieth century but was later almost completely absent from political discourse, has been relaunched. The concept of liberal democracy now enjoys support from Arab intellectuals who rejected it in the 1960s and 1970s as a Western ideology unsuitable to Arab culture and countries. These intellectuals are disenchanted with their governments, want political reform, and, despite the growing anti-Western and particularly anti-American sentiments in the region, are ready to accept that democracy is a valid political system for the Arab world. The intellectual elite has come to see democratic reform as an absolute necessity not only to break the hold of authoritarian regimes, but also to revitalize Arab

societies, opening up their economies and societies alike. Even Arab governments, under pressure from their citizens and foreign governments, feel they must echo this sentiment that the time for reform has come. The willingness to implement reform is another matter.

The United Nations Development Program's *Arab Human Development Reports* of 2002 and 2003, written by Arab intellectuals, contain an impassioned call for democratic change. So do other Arab manifestos, including that issued in March by a group of intellectuals meeting at the reborn Alexandria library in Egypt. The sincerity of some of these calls can be questioned—many of the so-called reformers who signed the Alexandria statement are close to their governments, belong to ruling parties, or write for government-controlled newspapers. The conference itself was sponsored by the Egyptian government, which went to great lengths to advertise and distribute the final statement. Nevertheless, these calls for democracy are being issued with increasing frequency and are changing the nature of political discourse in Arab countries. But there are also clear signs that this newfound interest in democracy has not translated so far into an attempt to build popular constituencies for democratic change.

Political parties embracing democracy remain weak, their leaders isolated in downtown offices while Islamist organizations set up headquarters in lower-class sections of town. Prodemocracy intellectuals in general shun political parties and prefer to set up nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), often with foreign funding. These organizations can generate quickly visible activities such as conferences that receive attention abroad. But these groups are not necessarily able to speak to the general public in their own countries. As a result, the acceptance of democratic ideas by Arab publics revealed by opinion polls has not become the foundation for the rise of a new political force. Ideologically, the Arab street belongs much more to Islamist preachers than to democracy activists.

Not only have prodemocracy elites failed to build broad-based constituencies, they have tended to ignore the crucial issue of how constituencies could be developed. Advocates of democracy move in a small world, somewhat isolated from their own societies. They congregate in their NGOs and progressive think tanks, and write commentaries for domestic and pan-Arab newspapers. They reach across borders to like-minded people in other Arab states, but do not attempt to reach down into their own countries. In part, this failure to reach out to the public is explained by the difficulty of organizing in countries with illiberal regimes; in part, however, it is also a function of the gulf that still separates the educated elite from the rest of the population in the Arab world. Whatever the causes of the problem, the consequences are clear: because democratic elites do not have a popular constituency and do not seem able to formulate a plan to develop one, they argue with disturbing frequency that democracy in the Arab world can only come from the top. They imagine gradual reform by enlightened, modernizing political leaders—often expected to arise in the next generation. Democratic aspirations turn into a wait for deliverance.

Organizations with a broad base of support exist in the Arab world, but they remain ambivalent about democracy. They are not averse to mobilizing the population, but are suspicious of free political participation in a competitive system that recognizes citizens' rights to make free choices. Islamist groups today, like the Nasserite, Ba'athist, or more broadly Arab nationalist parties of yesterday, have a large following in all Arab countries, thus establishing links between political elites and a popular base. Arab nationalist or socialist parties believed in mobilizing the population and forged a social compact based on welfare measures. They also thought that they were the best arbiters of what was good for the country or for the Arab world, thus that individual choices could

not be allowed to trump those leading to the public good. In practice, this meant that these parties turned authoritarian in the name of the public good. Similarly, Islamist parties, even those that profess their commitment to democracy, still struggle to reconcile the concept of the citizen's right to make individual choices and the idea that there are God-given truths that human choices must not contradict. This is a classic tension faced by all parties rooted in religion, no matter what the religion is. Even when they profess to support democracy as many do, including at least some in the Muslim Brotherhood, most Islamists add a caveat—democracy is good as long as it does not lead to choices that go against the *sharia*. Since Islamic law is not a code, but a collection of interpretations by different sects and different schools within the sects over centuries, respect for Islamic law can lead to democracy or to its rejection, depending on the interpretation chosen.

BREAKING OUT OF THE HOLDING PATTERN

Democratic elites in the Arab world so far have proven incapable of building a following, and elites that do have a constituency are not committed to democracy. The major constituency-based organizations in the Arab world at this point are either ruling parties that build their following on patronage or Islamist parties that construct it on faith and ideological commitment. With democratic elites poorly embedded in society and embedded elites poorly committed to democracy, discussions of political reform in Arab countries are vigorous, but actual change is slow, largely orchestrated from the top, and carefully limited to prevent any real challenge to incumbent regimes. As far as reform is concerned, the Arab world is in a holding pattern.

The holding pattern could conceivably be broken from the top. One or more incumbent governments could embark on a serious process of political reform. This scenario, often portrayed as the most suitable and least dangerous path toward democracy in the Middle East, is not likely to unfold. True, reform in most countries is ultimately introduced from the top by an incumbent political elite. Fortunately, revolutions are rare and are often led and controlled by political elites. But reform from the top usually comes in response to political pressures that make it costly and dangerous for regimes to insist on maintaining the status quo. To be sure, there are leaders who introduce reform on their own initiative in order to implement their own vision of a better society, but such reforms usually aim at modernizing the country rather than at making it more democratic—China, Singapore, and Iran under the Shah offer examples of modernizing reforms introduced from the top, without any democratic opening. And even in conservative regimes some individuals favor reform. However, the split between reformists and hard-liners, as identified by studies of Latin America and Southern Europe as the key to successful democratic transformations, is much more likely to take place when a regime experiences pressure for change.

Conceivably, a split between reformists and hard-liners could also be brought about by external pressure. This is unlikely to happen in most Arab countries. Outsiders have little leverage on the most important Arab countries. Dependence on Saudi oil makes it impossible for the United States or Europe to put pressure for democratic reform on the Saudi regime while also depending on it to stabilize oil prices. Similarly, pressure on Egypt is always tempered by its recognition of the legitimacy of the state of Israel. United States and, more generally, Western interests in the Middle East are too complex for political reform to remain consistently a central part of the agenda. In countries where the West does not have burning national interests—for example in Yemen—outside

pressure can be more consistent. In the absence of organized domestic constituencies, however, governments are able to limit the change to symbolic steps that do not alter the nature of the regime.

Arab countries have much experience with reform from the top. With the exception of the Gulf states, which started the process of economic and political change late, most Arab countries have experienced successive phases of political reform. The issue of democracy has been on the political agenda repeatedly and in some cases it has advanced substantially, only to be abandoned again. For instance, in Egypt, and to a lesser extent in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, democracy was a part of a nationalist project during the 1930s and 1940s, but died as an issue during the following two decades. Democracy was already on the agenda in Morocco in the 1960s, but it failed to advance beyond a cosmetic multipartyism until recently, and even now the prognosis is uncertain. Everywhere, the absence of organized constituencies bringing sustained pressure for democratic change has allowed the process of political reform to slow down or be reversed.

While democracy is unlikely to develop without sustained pressure by organized constituencies, the existence of such pressure does not guarantee successful transformation. Popular constituencies with nondemocratic goals are a threat to democracy—they supported the rise of the Nazis in Germany, the fascists in Italy, and many populist leaders in Latin America, including Venezuela's current President Hugo Chávez. Furthermore, challenged regimes do not always respond by developing a strong reformist wing. On the contrary, they may unite to suppress the dissidents. Even when the response to pressure is reform, it may simply amount to a revamping of the institutions of control. A recent example of reform that strengthens the incumbent regime is offered by Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Following a poor showing by the party's vetted candidates for the National Assembly in 2000, the NDP undertook a major effort to reinvigorate its organization and strengthen its hold over the country.

The prospects for democracy in the Arab world depend on the growth of constituencies committed to furthering the democratic goal, ideally because they are truly committed to democracy, but at a minimum because they see democracy as a means to gain power and further their interests. No democracy promotion effort from the outside will achieve much unless internal constituencies develop. The question is, how can constituencies able to support a sustained process of political reform develop in the region? This is a crucial issue for Arab activists as well as for foreign governments and NGOs seeking to promote political change.

MASS CONSTITUENCIES FOR DEMOCRACY: A CONUNDRUM

Little evidence supports the contention that the desire for liberal democracy is not only universal, but also strong enough for large numbers of people to work hard to achieve it. To be sure, in opinion polls people everywhere express a preference for respect of human rights—nobody likes the midnight knock on the door. They usually, although not universally, express a preference for a political system that gives them the right to choose among competing parties and candidates. When it comes to actively demanding democratic change, the situation changes. Liberal democracy is an ideology that appeals the most to intellectual elites and to people whose most basic needs for food, shelter, and security have been satisfied. Many studies have documented that Western-style, liberal democracy thrives most easily in countries with a large middle class and in those with rapidly improving

economic conditions. Furthermore, with the notable exception of India, democratic systems implanted in poor countries have rarely lasted. The duration of the democratic experiment is directly related to the level of per capita income reached by the country, as Adam Przeworski's work shows. Even in countries that appeared securely democratic, an economic crisis can weaken if not eliminate support for democracy. Venezuela is at present the most dramatic example of such crisis-induced democratic reversal, but there is mounting fear that economic difficulties in other Latin American countries threaten the democratic gains of the 1980s and 1990s.

This link between support for democracy and relative economic prosperity is not surprising. While democracy promises protection of rights and a political process that gives citizens a role in forming the government, it does not promise concrete policy outcomes. Protection of some rights—for example protection against arbitrary arrest—is important to everybody, but other rights—for example that of free speech—provide limited benefit to people struggling for material survival. Political participation can help redress socioeconomic grievances, but not necessarily quickly and certainly not inevitably. Some countries now include in their constitutions not only so-called “first generation” political and civil rights, but also “second generation” economic and social rights, but they cannot deliver on the latter. The right to work and the right to safe housing are much more difficult to turn into reality than the right of assembly and the right to vote.

The abstract rights- and process-oriented character of democracy is in sharp contrast to the concrete promises made by some of the ideologies with which democracy has had to compete historically, particularly nationalism and socialism. Nationalism does not promise people the right to fight for the establishment of their own country, it promises them their own country. Socialism promises jobs and economic equality. These are concrete promises with a more direct, mass appeal with which the more abstract idea of democracy has historically had trouble competing. Furthermore, these ideologies tap into people's emotions, including resentment, much more easily than democracy.

MAKING DEMOCRACY RELEVANT

Yet, democracy does not always remain an elite ideology without mass support. In well-established democracies, habit, education from an early age, and to some extent national identity make democracy a broadly accepted ideology—believing in democracy is part of being American, and most Americans would say they believe in democracy even when in practice they accept nondemocratic values. The same is true in many other countries. But even in nondemocratic countries, democratic ideals can gain widespread support and become a catalyst for political mobilization. In Eastern European countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, democratic principles were an inspiration to the mass movements that toppled the incumbent regimes. The failure of democracy to develop a broader appeal in the Arab world is thus not an inevitable consequence of the nature of democracy, but a phenomenon that needs to be explained.

Several factors can make democracy into an ideology that attracts a mass following. When people have embraced other, more facily popular ideologies with disastrous consequences—for example the radical, expansionist nationalism of fascism and Nazism—disillusionment gives democracy mass appeal. Or democracy can be perceived as the only alternative to an existing, hated political

system. In Eastern Europe, democracy was seen as the opposite of communism, in the same way as the United States was seen as the opposite of the Soviet Union. In Latin America in the 1980s, democracy won new support from populations tired of the conflict, instability, and poor governance that they had experienced for decades under populist regimes or military dictatorships. Other factors also facilitated the acceptance of democracy in these parts of the world, including a perception that democracy was part of their cultural background and long-standing political aspirations. In Eastern Europe, furthermore, the example of the more prosperous, stable, and democratic West was also a strong factor in creating support for democracy.

Democracy's mass appeal that develops when people become deeply dissatisfied with the existing leaders and political systems can be very short-lived or, in some cases, more apparent than real. The movement for democracy that developed in Serbia, leading to the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic, has not led to a stable democratic system. The outcome of the recent transition in Georgia is still unpredictable. And it is already painfully clear that the prodemocracy movements that developed in many African countries during the 1990s, in Zambia or in Senegal, for example, were in reality movements for change, rather than for democracy. The rejection of an unpopular regime should not be confused with a desire for democracy and even less with the existence of a political movement capable of supporting the demand for democratization over the long haul.

Long-lasting movements for democratic transformation have developed historically when the idea of democracy has become associated with ideologies with an immediate popular appeal. Nationalism and socialism in particular have contributed to the spread of democracy in some countries. And in some Catholic countries, religion helped the diffusion of democratic ideal with the growth of Christian Democratic parties.

European nationalism in the nineteenth century had a democratic component. The political elite that led the fight for a state supposedly coterminous with a pre-existing nation also upheld the ideals of political participation and equality of rights that underpin democracy. In the twentieth century, anticolonial nationalism, led by European-educated or at least European-influenced elites, also embraced some democratic ideals. Full acceptance of liberal democracy, however, was tempered by the desire of the ideologues of anticolonial movements to distance themselves from the West and to develop systems based on an indigenous culture and values. Additionally, the appeal of the Soviet model, particularly strong in the 1960s, and the unwillingness of the new political elite to accept checks on their power also limited the implementation of liberal democracy.

Nationalism did not lead directly and automatically to democracy. The Revolutionary War in the United States was not followed by democracy but by a republican form of government in which participation was originally extremely limited and expanded slowly, only including women in 1920 and providing full participation of African-Americans in the 1960s. European nationalism spawned democratic ideals in the late nineteenth century, but fascism and Nazism in the 1920s and 1930s halted the process of democratic transformation for twenty years. Anticolonial nationalism led directly to the rise of a democratic political system in India, but most former colonies quickly ditched their democratic constitutions, embraced some form of socialist ideology, and established authoritarian single party systems or military regimes. In most of these countries, new efforts to bring about a democratic transformation did not resume until the 1980s and the 1990s. But in some countries and periods, including in Egypt in the 1920s as will be shown below, nationalism contributed to the spread of democracy.

Socialism also helped in the diffusion of democracy in many European countries by turning into social democracy. Socialist ideals of economic justice, the end of exploitation, and equality across social classes had an immediate appeal to people struggling under the difficult conditions of the early industrial revolution. Socialist parties originally believed political transformation could only come through revolution. But some socialist parties eventually decided to try other tactics until the right conditions for revolution arose. Turning to the ballot box, they pulled their followers into the democratic process, particularly once they started obtaining concrete results with the enactment of pro-labor legislation and welfare state reforms. The fact that democratic participation brought about tangible results helped make democracy a valued ideal in itself, rather than simply a means to enact parts of the socialist agenda until the revolution unfolded. Except for die-hard, fringe political organizations, the goal of revolution receded farther and farther and eventually faded away. As in the case of nationalism, the democratic outcome of socialism was not inevitable. In countries where socialist parties did not accept the idea that the ballot box was a means to achieve their goals, and turned instead to violence to achieve power and repression to maintain it, socialism became a major setback for democracy.

The growth of Christian Democratic parties in Catholic countries also helped gain support for democratic political systems. Christian democratic parties started developing in the nineteenth century in opposition to, rather than with the support of, the church hierarchy. Like many fundamentalist Islamists today, the Catholic church did not accept the separation of church and state or the legitimate existence of a political sphere subject to the will of the majority rather than divine law. It took a long time, as well as the loss of virtually all territory once governed directly by the church, for most Catholics, and above all for the church hierarchy, to reconcile themselves to the emergence of secular and democratic political systems. Christian democratic parties played a very important role in gaining acceptance for democracy among the more tradition- and religion-bound segments of the population, because they reconciled the idea of individual participation and choice with a conservative program respectful of church doctrine.

Disillusionment with other political systems or pairing with popular ideologies or with religion helped transform democracy into an idea with mass political appeal in many countries. The downside of this method of diffusion is that democracy has often proven a somewhat fragile ideology, because many people expected too much from it or saw it as a means to an end. People who embrace democracy because they see it as the opposite of the status quo easily turn against democracy when it does not deliver. In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, disenchantment with the lack of jobs and economic security that developed with the end of socialism has led to nostalgia for the socialist past on the part of some, particularly older people. In Latin America, significant segments of the public are turning against parties and leaders who profess democracy but deliver economic misery. In Venezuela, long considered a consolidated democracy, a deep economic crisis led voters to throw out the old parties that had embraced democracy for forty years and to turn instead to a populist leader. While the case of Venezuela is the most extreme, economic crisis threatens support for democracy in other countries as well and could lead to a revival of populism or even socialist ideals.

Similarly, nationalism easily prevails over democracy if the two come into conflict. In the Balkans, nationalists were willing to embrace democratic processes as a means of gaining power, but they were not willing to give up their ethnonationalist aspirations in order to recognize the equal rights of all population groups. Nationalists came to power through democratic elections in

Croatia, but did not behave democratically once they were in power, particularly where the rights of minorities were concerned. Even Slovenia, arguably the most democratic of all former Yugoslav republics, remains opposed to the return of minority group refugees.

Democratization in the Arab world, when it takes place, will undoubtedly follow its own path and it will differ in different countries. It will not follow closely the experience of other countries and regions. Yet, certain fundamental historical lessons are highly relevant. One is that democratic transformations require political organizations with a mass political base. The second is that organizations with a mass political base are developed more easily not around abstract democratic ideals but around concrete demands or ideologies with a direct emotional appeal. It is thus important to consider the ideologies with popular appeal that exist, and existed, in the Arab world.

MASS IDEOLOGIES IN THE ARAB WORLD

The transformation of democracy into an ideal with mass appeal has so far not taken place in the Arab world. The reason is not found in the peculiarities of Arab or Islamic cultures, but in historical circumstances. First, after an auspicious beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, when nationalism helped spread democracy in Egypt and some other countries, mass ideologies in the Arab world have remained antidemocratic. Second, the presence of the state of Israel has perpetuated in the Arab world a suspicion of Western intentions and Western ideas, including democracy.

Like all countries that experienced colonialism, Arab states in the 1950s and 1960s were seeking to distance themselves from the West not only politically but also ideologically. Reluctance to embrace what were perceived as Western—rather than universal—values in the name of cultural identity was widespread in this period. In most parts of the world, opposition to Western values declined as people learned from experience that the home-developed alternatives were worse. Disenchantment set in the Arab world as well, but reluctance to accept democracy was prolonged by the reality of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Arab perception that Western countries, and in particular the United States, blindly supported Israel and were indifferent to the plight of the Palestinians.

In this climate of nationalist resentment, the United States' criticism of Arab governments, which has become more open since September 11, and its new agenda of democracy promotion in the Arab world, have become another aggravating factor in the relations with Arab countries, rather than a bridge to Arab reformers. When the United States talks about the need to promote democracy in the Arab world, reform-minded Arabs appear to cringe rather than rejoice. They question why the same country that supports Israel, condones the injustice toward Palestinians, and has been tolerant of authoritarian Arab regimes now wants democracy. They bristle at the idea that the United States can contribute to reform in the Arab world. The invasion of Iraq has made the situation worse by giving pan-Arab nationalism a new boost and by heightening suspicions of real American intentions in the region. The end result is that even the most ardent supporters of democratic reform seek to distance themselves from the United States and to make clear that their democratic agenda is not the same as the United States'. Far from being a beacon for democrats as it was in Eastern Europe, in the Arab world the United States is a complicating factor.

Nationalism has not always been an antidemocratic ideology in the Arab world. On the contrary, between the end of World War I and the 1952 Free Officers' coup, Egypt provided a very interesting

example of how nationalism can popularize democratic ideas. Egypt did not become a model democracy in this period, far from it. The tensions between the British, the monarchy and the Wafd party, which controlled the government throughout much of the period, led to constant uncertainty. Nevertheless, Egypt was governed by a party that was both committed to the ideals of democracy and quite popular because of its strong nationalist stance while pushing for Egyptian independence and later restricting British influence.

The Wafd, as the Arabic name indicates, started as a delegation of prominent Egyptians who journeyed to London in 1918, when the European powers were rearranging the Arab world, in order to plead for the restoration of complete independence for Egypt, then a British protectorate. The British refused to receive the delegation and the rejection inflamed the sentiments of the Egyptian public, already chafing under British control. Massive protests and incidents the following year caused the British to reconsider their position and to restore Egyptian independence in 1922.

The Wafd was a quintessential liberal organization. It believed in democracy and in the market. It drew its support from the enlightened segment of the upper class, which sought to change and modernize the country, develop the economy (particularly the industrial sector), limit the power of the monarchy by subjecting it to a constitution, and promote political participation, although on the basis of limited suffrage. Because of its role in the restoration of Egyptian independence, the Wafd enjoyed enormous popularity in the 1920s. However, its leaders did little to capitalize on this enthusiasm in order to build a strong organization. As a result, the support the Wafd received for its nationalist position was not leveraged into support for democracy. Without an organized constituency, the Wafd also remained more vulnerable to the machinations of the king and of the British.

The Wafd's popularity declined steadily from its high point immediately after the restoration of independence. Its nationalist credentials were somewhat tarnished by the fact that the Wafd governments agreed to the continuation of the British presence. Nevertheless, it remained the dominant party, in part for lack of viable alternatives, and won elections repeatedly despite the palace's attempts to manipulate the results. After losing power from 1937 to 1942, the Wafd made a comeback and even as late as 1950 managed to win 228 out of the 319 seats in the Council of Deputies.

Although the Wafd filled most of the political space in this period, it did not fill the ideological space. With the foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, the Wafd message of Egyptian nationalism and democracy was challenged with a new message of renewal based on the tenets of Islam and thus pan-Arab in its vision. Also, during World War II, anti-British sentiments led some Egyptians to look favorably to the doctrines propagated by Britain's enemy, Germany.

After the Free Officers' 1952 coup, Gamal Abdel Nasser quickly filled the popular political space more convincingly than the Wafd ever had. Nasser had many cards to play to win support, and he played them all successfully until the day he died. He played the Egyptian nationalist card quickly by restoring Egyptian sovereignty over the Suez Canal. He played the pan-Arab card, paying a heavy material price for it but also enhancing his image in the entire region. He played the card of Arab socialism by carrying out land reform, investing in the development of state controlled heavy industry, building the Aswan Dam, opening the universities to the children of the middle and lower middle class, and giving them government jobs when they graduated. The economic policy was essentially unsustainable, but it was popular with the Egyptian populace. One card Nasser did not play, however, was that of democracy.

The most significant ideological challenge Nasser encountered while in power came from the Muslim Brotherhood, whose religious message continued to resonate despite Nasser's popularity. Remarkably, there was no true democratic challenge in the Nasser period—the Wafd message simply disappeared with the organization. It is not surprising that, when Anwar Sadat replaced Nasser in 1971 and cast around for a means to fight the lingering popularity of Nasserism and establish his political identity, he turned to Islam. The 1970s marked the growth of Islamist movements in Egypt and in the rest of the Arab world. The ideological space briefly occupied by the Wafd's nationalism early on, and then by Nasser's Arab socialism and pan-Arabism, started being filled by Islamic organizations. By contrast, Sadat's decision to restore a modicum of democracy to the country in the late 1970s did not lead to an upsurge of democratic enthusiasm. The New Wafd party, revived in 1978 when Sadat legalized multiparty competition, completely failed to capture popular support, as did other parties professing democracy. However, Islamist organizations, even if banned from political participation, continue to command a following. The Egyptian political space at this time is occupied by the Governing National Democratic Party, with its strong apparatus of patronage and clientelism. The ideological space is to a large extent occupied by the Islamists.

The history of Egypt in the period discussed above is unique in many respects, but some of its elements are found elsewhere. Anticolonial nationalism had a democratic component in other countries as well. Nasserism inspired people well beyond Egypt's boundaries. The Ba'th parties of Syria and Iraq embraced the same ideas, as did the Front of National Liberation in Algeria. The countries of the Gulf, which started their economic and political development much later, did not experience these early democratic and Arab socialist trends. The more recent spread of Islamic ideologies, however, is as evident in the Gulf as it is in other parts of the Arab world. Today, Islamic movements have come to occupy an important part of the political space—the lack of free elections makes it impossible to know how important—and an even more significant part of the popular ideological space.

BUILDING CONSTITUENCIES FOR DEMOCRACY

Without broad-based constituencies, democracy in the Arab world will not progress very far. Governments will introduce some reforms as long as they can do so without undermining their own power and exposing themselves to real competition. Not surprisingly, governments are unlikely to give up substantial power unless they confront widespread demands for change. Intellectuals alone cannot exercise sufficient pressure.

How can broad-based democratic constituencies be developed in the Arab world today? Here, the lessons from other parts of the world appear relevant. Preaching democracy in the abstract is unlikely to attract a mass following. As in other parts of the world, constituencies for democracy will develop either because people feel that all other alternatives to an unacceptable status quo have been exhausted or because democracy is associated with less abstract, more emotionally satisfying ideas with an immediate popular appeal. In neither case are such constituencies likely to emerge spontaneously, without a serious organizing effort.

There is much dissatisfaction with incumbent governments in all Arab countries, but only intellectuals, not the general public, hold the perception that all alternatives other than democracy have been exhausted. The vision of a pure and virtuous Islamic state as the alternative to present

corruption still has a strong hold on the imagination of many. Even the less than edifying examples of the Islamist regimes in Iran, Afghanistan, and the Sudan are dismissed by true believers as the result of an aberrant Islamism, rather than of a basic flaw in the Islamist state concept. While government repression and the absence of free and fair elections in most countries make it very difficult to know exactly how much support Islamist organizations have, it is clear that their appeal is not exhausted in most countries. In this context, it is important to watch closely political development in Algeria, which has seen for ten years the very worst of Islamist groups run amok, and in Iran, which has experienced at first hand that an Islamist government does not necessarily correspond to the ideal. In these two countries, people may indeed see democracy as the only alternative.

Can democracy still combine with other ideologies and gain purchase that way? Can any of the ideas that have held or hold sway over mass publics in the Arab world become conduits for a broad acceptance of democracy? At the height of post-Cold War enthusiasm, many analysts would have been skeptical of such a hypothesis, assuming that ideologies other than democracy were dead. After witnessing the rampant nationalism of the Balkans, the spread of Islamic ideologies in the Arab world, and the revival of populist and socialist ideas in Latin America, the notion that other ideologies are dead and democracy has triumphed has become untenable. The question is whether any of these ideologies could become the vehicle for transforming democracy from an elite to a mass movement in the Arab world.

The combination of nationalism and democracy that some Arab countries experienced in the past is unlikely to be repeated. Single country nationalism is not a compelling ideology once the goal of independence is reached. Pan-Arab nationalism still exists both at the level of the leadership and at the popular level, and it will continue to do so until the Palestinian problem is settled and thus no longer feeds collective outrage on the part of the Arab public. At the popular level, this pan-Arab nationalism fed by outrage is a vehicle for extremism rather than for democracy, and is more likely to encourage acts of terrorism than demands for elections. There is also a residue of pan-Arabism found at the elite level, for example in the constant and usually unsuccessful attempts by the members of the Arab League to stake out common positions on important issues. Controlled by the incumbent governments, this elite pan-Arabism is not a vehicle for democracy, either.

There is also a residue of socialism in some Arab countries, fed by a mixture of nostalgia and, most importantly, by difficult economic conditions. Nostalgia will undoubtedly recede with the change of generations, but the socioeconomic conditions that feed socialism—high unemployment rates, severe income inequality, a perception of injustice—are likely to worsen in many Arab countries. This suggests that a segment of the Arab population will remain open to the ideas of redressing social injustice and improving the conditions of the downtrodden, which are the backbone of socialism and populism. The right leadership could conceivably build this aspiration for a better material life into a demand for democratic political participation, giving rise to social democratic parties or movements that might advance both the cause of democracy and that of socioeconomic justice, as happened in Europe in the past. The likelihood of such development needs to be discussed for each country separately. In general, however, socialist parties are organizationally quite weak in the Arab world. Furthermore, socioeconomic discontent can have many manifestations besides social-democracy. Often, discontent leads people to embrace nondemocratic populist leaders. It can cause people to turn to violence. More importantly, in the Arab world conditions that could create

support for socialism or social-democracy are also leading to support for Islamic organizations. Thus, while the widespread discontent based on socioeconomic problems could theoretically be mustered to build constituencies for political change and democratic participation, if there was a deliberate effort to do so, this is not happening and not likely to happen.

Islamist organizations are key to building constituencies for democracy in the Arab world today. While these organizations are not intrinsically oriented toward democracy, they do occupy such an important part of the political space that it would be very difficult to build large democratic constituencies without them. The seemingly paradoxical idea that Islamist organizations could contribute to the spread of democracy should not be dismissed out of hand. First, there is no fundamental incompatibility between Islam and democracy. Theological arguments showing that the two bodies of ideas are compatible have been mustered for over a century by a variety of thinkers and are quite well known. More importantly, the leaders of many Islamist groups are now taking a stand against violence and in favor of participation in the democratic process—although they are often doing so under the duress of prolonged imprisonment. Many are willing to at least engage in a debate on democracy, although it is not always clear, at least to this writer, exactly what different exponents of Islamic ideologies mean by democracy. Moderate Islamic parties are already participating in the electoral process in some countries, for example in Morocco, Algeria, and Jordan. Where they participate legally, Islamist parties have not swept to power and have contributed instead to the pluralism of the political system. But election results are difficult to interpret in the Arab world, where the process is invariably manipulated by the incumbent governments. It is thus difficult to predict what would happen if more Islamist organizations chose the electoral route and if elections were truly free and fair.

So far, many governments, like Egypt, remain adamantly opposed to the participation of even moderate Islamists and many Islamist organizations remain ambivalent about democracy. These problems are neither surprising nor unduly troubling—it took decades for Christian democratic parties in Europe to really develop their identity and overcome the opposition of the Catholic establishment and the suspicion of other political parties. A democratic transformation of Islamist political parties is not impossible, but much has to change before Islamist groups fully contribute to a mass movement in support of democratic transformation.

While the popular support enjoyed by Islamist organizations makes them key to the emergence of democratic constituencies, democracy cannot thrive without political parties that represent a variety of points of view and offer a variety of platforms. Other organizations thus must also change and build their own constituencies. Old, now sclerotic, socialist parties have to rethink what constitutes a progressive agenda in the twenty-first century, rather than hanging on to worn-out ideas. Prodemocracy intellectuals need to go beyond the debates and manifestos produced within the comfortable confines of liberal NGOs and be willing to venture into a much more complex world of organization building. The foreign NGOs and contractors that try to promote democracy in Arab countries need to reconsider whether the generous funding of civil society organizations is not slowing down reform by siphoning off potential leaders from broad-based political parties into small elite organizations. None of this will happen easily, and certainly not automatically. Particularly at a time when terrorism is a real problem, both in Arab countries and internationally, suspicion of Islamic groups is inevitably high. Arab governments, furthermore, are threatened not just by possible terrorists, but also by any political organization that can mobilize a large constituency, as

Islamist groups have the potential of doing. Bringing any large constituency into the democratic process inherently threatens the incumbent government. No matter what its ideological basis, any organization with mass support can become itself undemocratic and dangerous.

Most Arab governments will resist the formation of broad-based organizations, no matter what their ideological stance, because large organizations are dangerous to the perpetuation of their powers. This is not a situation unique to the Arab world. Except in the few countries where the incumbent regime simply collapsed because of external circumstances, as in some Eastern European countries, democratic transformation has always been a conflictual, though not necessarily violent process. That is why democracy-minded intellectuals operating in small NGOs and think tanks are extremely unlikely to bring about change unless they succeed in building larger constituencies. And these larger constituencies, if Arab countries are like all others, are unlikely to be built purely around the abstract ideals of democracy.

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